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FAMILY RESPONSES TO A STUDY OF AVAILABLE SUPPORT
SYSTEMS DURING SEPARATION

D. BENSON

E. VAN VRANKEN

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NAVAL HEALTH RESEARCH CENTER

P. O. BOX 85122
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92138

NAVAL MEDICAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT COMMAND
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(6) Family Responses to a Study of Available
Support Systems During Separation*

(10) Dorothy/Benson Ed/Van Vranken
Social Services Specialist

Ed Van Vranken, D.S.W.

Major, U.S. Army

Family Studies Branch

Naval Health Research Center

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Abstract

A group of 85 Navy families who experienced routine nine-month military separations were asked to report their perceptions of available service supports existing prior to deployment, during separation, and at reunion. In addition, their reactions to participation in this in-depth family research project were elicited.

With rare exception, results showed that families did not perceive family research interviews as an invasion of privacy. They in fact welcomed them and viewed them as a demonstration of genuine interest in their families and in their personal opinions. The majority of the families suggested they believed that participation in the study made a favorable impact on their family.

Wives, more so than husbands, expressed the need for counseling services both before, during and following separation, which would indicate that there should be ongoing supports for families--not merely during the separation period. Results also showed that telephone and mail communications between spouses during separation were important to family members in dealing with the stress of separation. Counseling and/or group activities during the separation period to provide reassurance and emotional support for wives were frequently noted as a much needed service, which were not always available.

Both husbands and wives reported that they could have benefitted from family counseling services subsequent to the husbands' return to facilitate the family reintegration process.

The Family Studies Branch of the Center for Prisoner of War Studies has conducted numerous investigations into the social and psychological adjustment of military families in coping with the hardships of prolonged war induced, separations. These studies determined that service support systems could facilitate the coping process in the case of prolonged separation (McCubbin & Dahl, 1974). These investigations also suggested that one critical area for future research was the examination of coping techniques of military families experiencing routine separation and the role of military community support systems in aiding and supporting these families.

It should be noted that numerous imaginative and comprehensive service support systems have been developed in military communities. However, as with their civilian counterparts, military communities are faced with the necessity of evaluating services to insure program relevancy. There is also increased recognition by those who develop and deliver services that the mere expansion of existing programs will not solve the problem of "failure to reach" high risk or vulnerable families. As has been noted "... a service not delivered when and where needed is not a service at all." (Richan, 1969: p. 22).

The general goal of this portion of the study was the discovery of general information and insights, thus the exploratory-descriptive research design was utilized. As noted by Kerlinger, a major thrust of this type of design is to discover significant variables in the

field situation, to discover relationships among variables, and to lay groundwork for later, more systematic and rigorous testing of hypotheses (Kerlinger, 1964: 388). Data for this presentation were obtained as part of a more comprehensive investigation of family adjustment to separation, and were accomplished through structured interviews and questionnaires with both husband and wife separately, 1-4 months after reunion. The approach is retrospective, in that families were asked post-reunion to report perceptions of situations as they existed prior to deployment, during deployment, and at reunion. Their reactions during the three in-depth family interviews also served as a data source.

Let us first describe the study process and discuss subjective reactions both to the separation and to their participation in the study. Secondly, we will describe responses to an open-ended question regarding (1) What services were provided during the pre-deployment, deployment and reunion phases which proved most helpful to the family in coping with the stress of separation, and (2) What services were needed but not available during each of the three phases of separation.

METHOD

The initial step of the study was to contact officials of a selected carrier and the four fighter and attack squadrons designated for an eight-month deployment to the Western Pacific. The project coordinators were not only well received but were given invaluable assistance in many areas.

It was emphasized that participation was to be entirely voluntary. Letters were written to all members of the squadrons, signed by their Commanding Officers, announcing the project and explaining that families would be randomly selected. The study involved the husband, wife and children between the ages 3 to 18. There were three phases of participation: (1) pre-deployment; (2) deployment/separation and (3) family reunion/reintegration. During each of the phases, family members were asked to participate in a structured interview and/or to complete research questionnaires. The approximate time the families were required to give, as well as the issue of confidentiality were discussed. Family life stress data were also obtained from the serviceman aboard the carrier during the deployment at sea.

When initially contacted about the study families expressed excitement at being chosen. One E-4 said "Wow, I've never won anything before, and I was sure hoping our family would be picked." A Chief Petty Officer who was not making the cruise responded, "My wife and I would surely relish the opportunity to tell you how it has been for us, both good and bad. Couldn't we talk with you anyhow?" There were people who called the Commanding Officer or his wife asking if they could participate even if they were not selected, with statements such as, "Man, would I like to tell someone what cruises are really like!"

Family interviews, conducted by social workers and psychologists of the Family Studies staff, were accomplished in the home setting. The

use of trained, skilled, interviewers assured not only high quality, responsible data collection, but also provided scientific objectivity as well as interpersonal sensitivity.

As stated by Koos "If the interview is to yield anything beyond the most superficial observance, it cannot be carried on with the persons immersed in icy apartness. Once having yielded this point, interviewing becomes a matter of candor, in one's self and one's data. The demand for scientific objectivity in social science is responsible for this icy apartness, and makes such an approach less objective rather than more so, because it leaves out of account the fact that human beings have emotions and that emotions are in many situations, a part of the data. To use techniques that detract from the possibility of getting this type of data is to detract from the hoped for objectivity (Koos, 1946; 146)."

The first interview often established the basis for a warm, personal friendship. It was not unusual for a family to ask for advice and counsel, but interviewers refrained from assuming a primary role of counselor. When indicated, however, referral and/or follow-up contacts were made for families who requested help or were in need of psychological, psychiatric or social services.

Certain wives even called interviewers long distance when they heard there had been a fire on the carrier or that the ship had been diverted from its original route seeking further information or emotional support. They called and wrote letters requesting referral resources or information about problems with children. We received birth announcements, news of promotions, and news that a long-awaited pregnancy was

confirmed. Not only were the families open and honest, they appeared fair in their assessment of their situation as they perceived it. Most people realized that the "Navy" wasn't directly responsible for the anxieties and stresses they were undergoing, but they seemed to need to talk about how they felt. Many men and women expressed wonder at the fact that the "Navy" could really be interested in what they thought.

Of the original 88 families selected for personal interviews only six elected not to continue participation in the study. Three families dropped out after the midcruise interview, two for divorce and one because of family problems. Six others who divorced after return agreed that serviceman and wife would see us separately for the reunion interview. The remaining study sample consisted of 82 families of which 31 families (officer = 17; enlisted = 14) were from an urban "open community" and 51 families (officer = 21; enlisted = 30) from the rural "closed community." If a man were released from the cruise early, the family usually wrote or called us so that we could schedule them for the reunion interview. It was sometimes necessary to travel extended distances for the separation interviews of families who had gone home during deployment. Upon return of the husband, some families had reassignment orders, and interviewers travelled to their new locations for the reunion interview. Because of this dedicated cooperation between the staff and the participants, there was no family that could not be located during the entire study period.

RESULTS

Family Reaction to Participation in the Study

In order to determine the reactions of individual family members to participation in the study, both husbands and wives were asked what impact they believed participation in the study had on their family. (See Table 1).

Findings for husbands and wives were consistent, with neither group reporting any negative impact on the family as a result of participation in the study. Approximately one-fourth of both the husbands and the wives felt that study participation had no impact on their family. The remaining 75 percent of both groups reported either positive or somewhat positive effects from participation in the study. (See Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

In addressing specific aspects of the study, respondents were asked six questions regarding the study and its value to them personally, as well as their overall view of its long-term value. Responses indicated that neither husbands nor wives found the in-depth family interviews too personal or to require too much of their time. While both spouses felt the research was a worthwhile project that would have long-term value, there was a tendency for wives to be more enthusiastic and positive than husbands as shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Our research suggests that, with rare exception, families do not perceive in-depth family research as an invasion of privacy. They, in fact, welcome it, and perceive it as demonstrating a genuine interest in them and confirms that their opinions are important. Those few families who indicated they felt family research to be an intrusion were usually the ones who were experiencing more severe family problems. Approximately three-fourths of both husbands and wives reported that participation in the research project had had a favorable impact on their families.

Family Reactions to Separation Experiences

During the predeployment phase, when the family was preparing for separation, there was a tendency for husbands to perceive available family services as being more helpful than did the wives. In fact, three times as many husbands, compared with wives believed that the predeployment briefings and brochures were helpful to the families. On the other hand, more wives than husbands felt the visits by the interviewers were helpful and provided opportunities for the expression of feelings regarding the separation.

There was general agreement by both spouses that delays in deployment were particularly destructive to family morale, and that the long hours husbands spend preparing for deployment were difficult for the family. It was suggested by certain families that by splitting the pre-deployment crew and having only half of the men on duty at one time, husbands could have been more definite about time available for their families during those stressful days. There was also general agreement between husbands and wives that group seminars prior to deployment would have had a beneficial

effect. They believed these seminars could have focused on information which would have increased family awareness of existing services. (See Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

During the actual separation period, there was general agreement that wives club activities had been helpful. However, the issue of good mail service did not elicit general agreement from respondents. Approximately 60 percent felt mail service was good, while 40 percent felt it could have been improved. This finding suggests that good mail service is important even though there is no consensus as to what constitutes good service. Another divided issue related to the deployment phase was that of adequate telephone service. Roughly 60 percent felt the phone service could have been improved while the remaining 40 percent believed it was good. It should be noted that for men only, of those who reported satisfaction with phone service, 88 percent were officers. Conversely, of those reporting dissatisfaction with phone service, 83 percent were enlisted personnel. Enlisted men also voiced pleasure with having an opportunity to take leave and return home during the cruise while officers' wives reported satisfaction with the opportunity to join their husbands during mid-cruise. There was also general agreement that "better services for the family" would have been beneficial, and that counseling services for both the individual and the family would have helped. (See Table 4).

Insert Table 4 about here

Factors related to the reunion phase also produced differing opinions. While 56 percent of the respondents reported satisfaction with the leave time they received upon return, 44 percent felt the leave policy was unsatisfactory. There was also considerable dissatisfaction with the homecoming events and unloading procedures when the ship docked. Officer wives, particularly, tended to emphasize the need for counseling services during the reunion phase. (See Table 5).

Insert Table 5 about here

CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on some of the reactions of family members to experiences of military families during pre-deployment, deployment and reunion phases of a routine military separation. In addition, family reactions to taking part in a longitudinal, in-depth, family research project were examined. The exploratory-descriptive approach utilized in this study allowed us to examine various dimensions of family adjustment to separation. In so doing, we believe we have broadened our understanding and knowledge of the needs and feelings of family members to this enigmatic aspect of life in the military.

TABLE 1

Impact of Participation on Family

	Negative	Somewhat Negative	No Impact	Somewhat Positive	Positive
Wife	0	0	20=27%	30=40%	25=33%
Husband	0	0	26=35%	31=41%	18=24%
Total	0	0	46=31%	61=41%	43=28%

TABLE 2

Value Observations Regarding Study

	YES	NO
Too Personal:		
Wife	3 = 4%	74 = 96%
Husband	3 = 4%	74 = 96%
Too Much Time:		
Wife	0 =	77 = 100%
Husband	2 = 3%	75 = 97%
Personally Gratifying:		
Wife	54 = 70%	23 = 30%
Husband	36 = 47%	41 = 53%
Good Project:		
Wife	73 = 95%	4 = 05%
Husband	56 = 73%	21 = 27%
Long Term Value:		
Wife	64 = 83%	13 = 17%
Husband	48 = 63%	28 = 37%

TABLE 3

Predeployment Factors

Services Perceived as Helpful						
	HUSBAND			WIFE		TOTAL
	N	% ¹		N	% ²	N % ³
GOOD PRE-DEPLOYMENT BRIEFING	O=5 E=12	22%		O=1 E=4	6%	O=6 E=16 14%
PRE-DEPLOYMENT BROCHURE	O=7 E=7	18%		O=4 E=1	6%	O=11 E=8 12%
SENT SOCIAL WORKER	O=1 E=3	5%		O=4 E=4	10%	O=5 E=7 8%
Services Perceived as Needed						
	HUSBAND			WIFE		TOTAL
	N	% ¹		N	% ²	N % ³
BETTER BRIEFING	O=2 E=4	8%		O=6 E=8	18%	O=8 E=12 13%
MORE TIME WITH FAMILY	O=2 E=11	17%		O=10 E=13	29%	O=12 E=24 23%
KEPT SCHEDULE	O=3 E=15	23%		O=12 E=13	32%	O=15 E=28 29%
GROUPS SEMINARS	O=1 E=8	12%		O=5 E=4	11%	O=6 E=12 12%

O = Officer
E = Enlisted

¹Percent of men (N = 82) who reported variable

²Percent of women (N = 82) who reported variable

³Percent of all (N = 164) who reported variable

TABLE 4

Separation Factors

Services Perceived as Helpful						
	<u>HUSBAND</u>		<u>WIFE</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>	
	<u>N</u>	% ¹	<u>N</u>	% ²	<u>N</u>	% ³
GOOD MAIL	0=2 E=12	18%	0=12 E=9	21%	0=14 E=21	20%
WIFE'S ACTIVITIES	0=6 E=13	17%	0=5 E=4	11%	0=11 E=17	14%
LEAVE TO COME HOME	0=1 E=13	18%	0=3 E=1	5%	0=4 E=14	12%
PHONE	0=7 E=1	11%	0=5 E=2	9%	0=12 E=3	10%
MEET AT MID CRUISE	0=3 E=2	6%	0=7 E=2	11%	0=10 E=2	9%

Services Perceived as Needed						
	<u>HUSBAND</u>		<u>WIFE</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>	
	<u>N</u>	% ¹	<u>N</u>	% ²	<u>N</u>	% ³
BETTER MAIL	0=2 E=12	18%	0=5 E=5	13%	0=7 E=17	16%
PHONE SERVICE	0=2 E=10	15%	0=4 E=7	14%	0=6 E=17	15%
COUNSELING FOR SELF AND FAMILY	0=3 E=7	13%	0=6 E=8	18%	0=9 E=17	16%
SHORTER CRUISE	0=3 E=7	13%	0=5 E=5	13%	0=8 E=12	13%
BETTER SERVICES FOR FAMILY	0=5 E=9	18%	0=3 E=13	20%	0=8 E=22	19%
CHEAPER FLIGHTS	0=1 E=10	14%	0=3 E=6	11%	0=4 E=16	13%
COMMUNICATION AND FAMILY	0=1 E=9	13%	0=1 E=7	10%	0=2 E=16	12%

0 = Officer

TABLE 5

Reunion Factors

Services Perceived as Helpful						
	<u>HUSBAND</u>		<u>WIFE</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>	
	N	% ¹	N	% ²	N	% ³
GOOD LEAVE	O=7 E=16	29%	O=5 E=6	14%	O=12 E=18	27%
HOMECOMING	O=4	10%	O=4 E=3	9%	O=8 E=7	10%

Services Perceived as Needed						
	<u>HUSBAND</u>		<u>WIFE</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>	
	N	% ¹	N	% ²	N	% ³
BETTER LEAVE	O=4 E=11	19%	O=6 E=3	11%	O=10 E=14	10%
COUNSELING OR GROUPS	O=3 E=4	9%	O=11 E=4	19%	O=14 E=8	14%
MEETING S/M AT SHIP AND UNLOADING	O=2 E=10	15%	O=7 E=14	27%	O=9 E=24	21%

O = Officer

E = Enlisted

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